



The
United
Reformed
Church

The United Reformed Church in Lion Walk
Christ Church United Reformed Church
The United Reformed Church at Chappel

Sunday 20th August 2023

Call to Worship:

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing.
Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise
Give thanks to him and bless his name.
For the Lord is good,
His steadfast love endures for ever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

May the peace of the Creator God be upon this world
binding all people together in unity and love.
May the peace of the forgiving Christ be upon this world
cleansing and restoring human relationships.
May the peace of the guiding Spirit be upon this world
replacing hatred with friendship and conflict with love.

Prayer/Meditation:

We don't always find our faith very easy. Sometimes we come to worship for comfort and reassurance; sometimes we come for guidance; sometimes we come to be challenged and inspired; sometimes we come just because it's what we do on a Sunday morning. But whatever the reason we're here, we know it's not just for our own benefit; it's not just because we enjoy the music or the familiar Bible stories; it's not just because we feel accepted and loved by this community of which we are a part; it's not just because we have been brought up to believe that going to church is a good and right thing to do; it's not just because we want to establish and maintain a relationship with God; it's not just because we want to learn more of who Jesus was and what he taught. All these things may be some part of the reason we are here, but it is above all because we feel called to participate in God's kingdom. We may be unsure of the part we are called to play; we may be unsure of what is being asked of us, we may be unsure of what life in the kingdom is actually like, we may be unsure of our ability to serve God, but we are here in faith, seeking forgiveness for past weaknesses and failures, and looking for ways in which we can play our part. For we are here to participate, to offer ourselves, and to engage in Christ's mission in the world; to seek new ways of using the gifts and talents that God has given us; to listen carefully for the Holy Spirit speaking through our worship and fellowship and through the words we hear and the people we meet and the service we offer today. Yet for all our good intentions of piety and faithfulness in worship, we carry with us into church the frustrations and annoyances that disturb us every day. How complicated life is; how busy, how difficult. We are caught in a web of relationships which too often become sterile, or irritating, or just a formality, or a trap from which we wish we could escape. We face work which is demanding, often with frustration and impatience, and little joy.

We hear the cries of a broken world, too often with despair or a sense of futility, as though there was nothing we could do to help.

And so it sometimes seems to us that we are shallow people, living life for ourselves, not going anywhere, not doing anything, not achieving much, not contributing a lot to the life of the world, not engaged in any mission.

We know that is not what we were created to be.

May the spirit of hope infuse our lives, so that what we have been may not determine what we will become. In Christ may we draw ever closer to God, and

may our worship today be sign, not of our religious zeal, but of our firm commitment to the Kingdom of God, and through it, may each of us move towards a fuller understanding of God's kingdom and of our place in it.

The Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy Kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. Amen

Reading: Jeremiah 23:23-29

Hymn 56:

Creating God,
your fingers trace
the bold designs of farthest space;
let sun and moon
and stars and light
and what lies hidden praise your might.

Sustaining God,
your hands uphold
earth's myst'ries known or yet untold;
let water's fragile blend with air,
enabling life, proclaim your care.

Redeeming God,
your arms embrace
all now despised for creed or race;
let peace, descending like a dove,
make known on earth your healing love.

Indwelling God,
your gospel claims
one family with
countless names;
let every life
be touched by grace
until we praise you face to face.

Reading: Luke 12: 49-56

Reflection:

There's one neat little tie-up between our two readings this morning - both of them mention *fire*. In Jeremiah it says: *Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?* In Luke Jesus is quoted as saying: *I came to bring fire to the earth.*

In Jewish thought, fire is a symbol of judgement, and just as Jeremiah is saying that the word of God is a Word of judgement, so also Jesus is saying that he comes to bring fire, to bring judgement.

It may occur to you straight away, as it occurred to me straight away, that this seems to flatly contradict what Jesus is reported as having said in John's gospel, chapter 12 at verse 47: *I come not to judge the world, but to save it.* If this seems like a glaring inconsistency, then it no more than sets the pattern for the verses that are to follow in Luke. For Jesus, the one we think of as the peacemaker, goes on to say, *Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.*

How on earth are we supposed to understand that? Is Jesus indeed a bringer of conflict? Or is there some hidden meaning that we haven't quite grasped?

The ancient Jewish commentary, the Talmud, has an interesting way of approaching the interpretation of scripture. In its commentary on the verses we read from the prophet Jeremiah - *Is not my Word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?* - the Talmud has this to say: *"As the hammer splits the rock into many splinters, so will a scriptural verse yield many meanings."*

The Rabbinic method of trying to understand scripture was to metaphorically hammer it to bits with the hammer of the Word of God, examine the splinters in minute detail, and come up with a sometimes quite extensive range of differing interpretations of the one passage. It's not a process that has much appeal for modern Christian preachers or their listeners, probably because we feel that every verse of scripture should have a single *correct* interpretation; that there should be only one way of looking at a verse, and that where we have conflicting interpretations, one must be right and the others must be wrong.

But since the documents of the New Testament are of Jewish origin, I think we are justified in breaking them up with the hammer of God's Word and looking at the splinters.

So, when we look at this passage in Luke where Jesus says that he has come to bring division, there are a number of ways of looking at it. First we need to note that this wasn't just some throwaway remark that could be dismissed as a casual exaggeration. He doesn't just say 'I have come to bring division' and then go on to his next point. No, he goes into some detail about what this division will actually entail. Five in one household will be divided three against two and two against three. Father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother - even the in-laws are involved in this great family conflict. So we can't get away with suggesting that, well, maybe it was something he said off the cuff and didn't really mean. He seems to have gone to trouble to emphasise the point.

If you were following the readings in the pew Bibles, you will have noticed that Luke 12:53 (the bit about fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, and so on) is written out like poetry rather than prose and this might have suggested to you that they were not original words of Jesus, but that he was quoting from some other source. Indeed he was. The words are from the prophet Micah, who says at chapter seven verse six: *Put no trust in a friend, have no confidence in a loved one; guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your embrace; for the son treats the father with contempt, the daughter rises up against the mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; your enemies are members of your own household.*

To find out why Jesus might have used this passage from Micah, we have to look at the context of both Micah and Luke a little more closely.

Micah first. In the very next verse, Micah goes on to say: *But as for me, I will look to the Lord. I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me.* So Micah is saying 'trust no-one because people - even those closest you - can be untrustworthy. Trust only in God.'

Bearing that in mind, we consider Luke, and we remember what Jesus has been saying to his people immediately before this speech about conflict - and which we have been looking at over the last two weeks. He has been speaking about putting faith in God's Kingdom and *not* in possessions; he has been saying 'don't worry' about the things that bother everyone else.

So there must surely be a connection between Micah and Luke here. Is Jesus pointing his people to the words of Micah, and emphasising the same message? The people around you can be a distraction; conflict and division are inevitable for those who follow Jesus - but don't worry. Set your hearts on the Kingdom of God. Jesus would have been speaking from experience, because the gospel evidence seems to suggest that he didn't have the cosiest of relationships with his own family. They are scarcely mentioned in the gospels, but when they are, they are portrayed as a hindrance rather than a help to his ministry - such as at the end of Mark chapter three. Maybe for Jesus, even family was one of those earthly ties that have to take a back seat in the Kingdom.

Another splinter we might notice in passing is that Jesus' quote from Micah describes conflict between generations - not 'husband against wife' or 'brother against sister' but:

father against son
and son against father,
mother against daughter
and daughter against mother,
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

There's certainly plenty of evidence of that kind of conflict in our world today.

And one final splinter. That's the possibility that we might just take the words completely at face value. Jesus said that he came not to bring peace but division. From our vantage-point of two thousand years on, we can clearly see that, however else we might want to interpret Jesus' words, they have without a shadow of a doubt come true. The followers of Jesus have almost from day one been in conflict with one another. From the uneasy and sometimes acrimonious relationship between Saint Peter and Saint Paul right up to the present day, the Christian church has been in conflict. Sometimes, as today, internal conflict that has damaged the Church itself but has had little effect on the world, and sometimes, in days gone by, involving whole nations and bringing not just family division but international conflict and war. Truly his coming brought not peace but division.

But this sermon, as I'm sure you have realised, has not been about division and conflict but about the interpretation of scripture. It has been an illustration of the hammer of God's Word that splits the rock of scripture into many splinters and produces many meanings. It has taken one passage of scripture and interpreted it in four ways. Its point, therefore, has been to emphasise the importance of studying, examining, discussing and interpreting the Word of God in scripture so that we may discover and engage with the new light and truth that constantly break forth from God's holy word.

HYMN 318:

Not far beyond the sea, nor high
above the heavens, but very nigh
your voice, O God, is heard.
For each new step of faith we take

you have more truth and light to break
forth from your holy word.

The babes in Christ your scriptures feed
with milk sufficient for their need,
the nurture of the Lord.
Beneath life's burden and its heat
the fully grown find stronger meat
in your unfailing word.

Rooted and grounded in your love,
with saints on earth and saints above
we join in full accord
to grasp the breadth, length, depth and height,
the crucified and risen might of Christ,
the incarnate Word.

Help us to press toward that mark,
and, though our vision now is dark,
to live by what we see;
so, when we see you face to face,
your truth and light our dwelling-place
for evermore shall be.

Prayer:

Jesus promised that those who seek will find, and so we bring now our prayers for all in our world, known and unknown to us who in different ways are seeking and searching. May the light of Christ shine upon them.

We pray for those who search for meaning, their lives empty, devoid of purpose, hungry for something or someone to put their trust in. In the bewildering variety of this world's voices, each claiming to offer an answer may the love of God break through and the message of the gospel touch their hearts so that they may find in Jesus the one who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. May the light of Christ shine upon them.

We pray for those for whom the journey of life is hard, beset by pain, sickness and sorrow, or overwhelmed by disaster, deprivation and injustice. In the trials they face and the burdens they struggle with may the love of God break through and the message of the gospel bring strength and comfort, help, healing and inspiration. May the light of Christ shine upon them.

We pray for those unsure of the way ahead, faced with difficult choices and vital decisions, troubled by situations in which they can see no way forward, or doubting their ability to cope with the demands the future will bring. In the uncertainties of this ever-changing world, may the love of God break through and the message of the gospel bring a new sense of direction, an inner peace, and the assurance that, whatever they may face they will know that nothing can separate them from the love of God. May the light of Christ shine upon them.

We pray for those who have gone astray - betraying their principles, or their loved ones. In this world of so many subtle yet powerful temptations may the love of God break through and the message of the gospel bring new beginnings so that, however low they may have fallen they will know themselves forgiven, accepted and restored. May the light of Christ shine upon them.

We pray for all who seek purpose, help, guidance and mercy. May they find in God the answer to their prayer and the end to their searching.

I invite you now to spend a few moments in your own prayer, in words or in silence, or simply in reflecting on the words we have read and the stories we have heard in our worship today.

Loving God, hear our prayer, which we offer in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Hymn 602:

Forth in the peace of Christ we go;
Christ to the world with joy we bring;
Christ in our minds, Christ on our lips,
Christ in our hearts, the world's true King.

King of our hearts, Christ makes us kings;
kingship with him his servants gain;
with Christ, the Servant-Lord of all,
Christ's world we serve to share Christ's reign

Priests of the world, Christ sends us forth,
this world of time to consecrate,
our world of sin by grace to heal,
Christ's world in Christ to recreate.

Prophets of Christ, we hear his Word:
he claims our minds, to search his ways,
he claims our lips, to speak his truth,
he claims our hearts, to sing his praise.

We are his Church, he makes us one:
here is one hearth for all to find,
here is one flock, one Shepherd-King,
here is one faith, one heart, one mind.

Benediction:

Christ has given us a new commandment:
that we love one another, as Christ has loved us.
By this, everyone will know that we are Christ's disciples,
if we share that love with the world.
And through this love, all things will be made new.
Let us go now, and do as Christ commands.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us and with all those we love, today and for ever more. AMEN